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A CIA Target: Radio Free Europe

Those anguished complaints from the right wing that press scrutiny has destroyed the Central Intelligence Agency have proven to be greatly exaggerated. The spooks have just been lying low since the exposure of their misdeeds. Now they're making a comeback.

One of the spy agency's targets is Radio Liberty-Radio Free Europe. Maybe it's a point of pride: Ostensibly intended to give straight news to Eastern European listeners awash in Soviet propaganda, the two Munich-based broadcasting stations were actually set up and staffed by the CIA.

In 1973, Congress put the stations under an independent, seven-member oversight board to eliminate the CIA image they had acquired. Now the spies want their propaganda outlets back.

The way they plan to do it, my reporters Indy Badhwar and David Saltz have learned, is to have the federal oversight board abolished. Since most managers of the two stations were recruited by the CIA—some of them from within the agency's own professional ranks—elimination of the governing board would put Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe back under CIA influence.

The man chosen to carry out the board's "termination with extreme prejudice" is national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. He is actively considering a proposal to abolish the board submitted by Leo Cherne, an old Brzezinski crony.

A recent eyes-only memo signed by Cherne states flatly that the federal board and its staff "are essentially incapable of performing their assigned mission," and recommends turning its functions over to—in other words, back to—the stations' management.

"Are we still overreacting to the sensitivity about government abuse of the radios which flowed from the period of intense concern with our intelligence activities?" the memo asks.

Insiders who have read the Cherne memo detect the fine hand of Paul Henze, former CIA station chief in Turkey who is now Brzezinski's sidekick on the National Security Council.

Cherne indignantly denied such a suggestion. "It could not be more false," he snapped. "I'm not in the habit of writing memos provided by other people."

Meanwhile, the beleaguered board has mounted its own counterattack in a four-page internal memo that accuses Cherne of not knowing what he's talking about, and of jumping to conclusions "without consulting any of the present members of the board or its professional staff."

The board memo suggests that Cherne's "enthusiasm [is] outrunning his knowledge."

Even more tellingly, the board lays bare the lack of professional background among the stations' top staff. "None of the top executives of the networks is ever has been a professional journalist," the memo notes.

"The director of engineering is not a graduate engineer. The present director of administration, also formally untrained, began work at Radio Free Europe in public relations. Labor relations have been entrusted to the same attorney for more than 25 years, although his record in the courts has been undistinguished and he has long been past retirement age."